

ABRAHAM, ISAAC, MRS. ABRAHAM AND BART

Some of this is in Genesis, some of it is not. The whole thing is running around in Phil's head as he's saying sayanora to his two roommates.

"Hey," the bad one yells, "where's my Bible? You taking it?"

Phil hands it over. "A week ago, I got up at 3:00 a.m., wrote this terrific biblical essay. Knew you wouldn't mind."

"What's this?" The roommate thumbs through, discovers the dog eared page in the Old Testament, Genesis.

"Oh, yeah, an accident, I think."

Tuning out the customary denunciations, Phil makes a courtesy phone call to advise Evanston. "Do whatever you fucking want," his stepfather says just before hanging up, "but for Christ's sake keep in touch."

He says to the good roommate, "Everything that I'm leaving behind is yours - the works."

"Everything?"

"Everything."

He gets on an el train, heads away from the UofC, hasn't learned all that much in three years anyway, lands in Evanston, where a minuscule room with a slanting floor in a greenish-painted B&B is for rent. He's grilled, "How old are you? Where's your suitcase? You don't look 21." No problem. He flashes his drivers license and forks over \$200, has maybe two-

and-a-half grand left. He's told, "No visitors, no noise, no drugs, no cooking. This is our home, please respect it."

Out of respect, he pulls down the tufted bedspread, takes off his shoes and test drives the mattress. "What's done is done," he mutters. He's thinking of two things. First, the problem - he always overcredits. He'll incubate the essay and read it over later. The second thing is this daring new beginning. He's made sure that here in Evanston he's got only what he's paid for with his own funds, thanks to you, Gibraltar, namely the new clothes on his back, his laptop, his printer, a ream of paper and some 9x12 envelopes. Everything else, meaning everything his stepfather bought and paid for, such as his wardrobe, three years of detailed class notes, various books, his whole education for practical purposes, is back at the UofC. No doubt about it, the good roommate had a windfall, forgot, however, to say thanks.

The hell with another rereading. He gets up, prints the essay and stuffs it in an envelope, which is even pre-labeled and stamped. He'll mail it off to some magazine, whichever one happens to be on the label. That's the way he lucked onto Gibraltar.

Instead of going over to Northwestern to check out the coeds, since he was up all night, he can use another test drive on the mattress. An hour's shuteye should do it, but the essay is still replaying in his head, and now something new is really

bothering him. Why didn't I think of this? Do I have to give Lenny Bruce credit? Should I at least dedicate it to him? I'm Mr. Worrywort Number One, and this is a legal question. Somebody here must be in law school.

Here's the thing. Just last week, the day before he received his Annual Gibraltar Literary Competition first prize, he's at the Medici on 57th Street and this long-legged girl, possibly named Betty – or more likely Edith, because of the braces on her teeth – picks him up. He tells her his name is Bart. She's a great big piece of dumb luck. She's obsessed with Lenny Bruce, but the point is her grandfather, the law professor, once defended Lenny Bruce in his obscenity trial in Chicago. Hard to steer the conversation with her, because every gambit somehow morphs right into a fresh story about Lenny Bruce.

In fact, she's on a first name basis with Lenny Bruce. "Lenny's best joke," she says, "explains the whole Leopold and Loeb case, you know where they thrill killed Bobbie Franks. Nobody, but nobody, could do what Lenny did to that case in just 7 words."

Since at this time Phil (Bart) has no idea that Gibraltar is on the way, he is still broke and has allowed her to grab the check for his french fries and coffee. I owe you, he's thinking, so he just sits there and listens.

She says, "Do you know Lenny's 7 words?"

"Not really."

"Without these 7 words, the Leopold and Loeb motives are incomprehensible. Here's what Lenny said. He said, 'That Bobbie Franks was a snotty kid.' Do you see that, Bart, how Lenny cuts through all that psychological bullshit and explains the inexplicable?"

They exit the Medici, and Betty or Edith says, "Wanna come up to my place for a free cup of coffee?"

"Oh boy, I wish I could, but that Lenny story is running around inside my brain." This no soft soap. This is absolutely true. He's already composing paragraphs and whole passages. "I'll call you."

"Sure you will."

Give credit where credit is due. She definitely put him on the right track, and he definitely intends to call her.

When he arrives at his apartment, it's only 10:00 p.m., and nobody's there. So he plucks the Bible from the roommate's bookcase and finds what he was looking for, something way back. It's in Genesis, which he learned about when he was 9 or 10 and his mother used to comb his hair and then drive him off to Sunday school.

Eventually he falls asleep with the Bible under his blanket, which is no doubt how the page got dog eared, and then he's awake again at 3:00 a.m., turning on his mental back burners and

banging away on his laptop. The rest is history. He has a more-or-less finished product, a definitive essay.

Now he's lying on the mattress in Evanston, acknowledging to himself that he couldn't have done it without Lenny. Nobody just goes out to kill somebody just for the thrill. There has to be a motive. Lenny found the motive. Very simple. Nobody likes a smart ass.

At age 10 Bart himself was a smart ass. There was something going on when his mother remarried and started closing the bedroom door. His stepfather turned out to be a good guy, but back then there was some friction, two alpha males in the house, and that was when Bart encountered Genesis in Sunday school.

In Genesis, Abraham and Mrs. Abraham are real old people, really old. They had no children, but they had a garden and they grew all kinds of roots and herbs. Some roots probably had Viagra properties, because all of a sudden Mrs. Abraham gets pregnant and Isaac is born.

Lenny's point is very simple. You've got look beyond the obvious, beyond the words in the text.

One day, out of the blue, God says to Abraham, Go on and slaughter your son Isaac, don't ask me why, it's just because I say so.

Abraham grabs Isaac, tells him, Now you're going to get it, ties him to a rock, takes out his knife. Isaac is scared

shitless. The situation is perfect. Abraham hates this kid. The voice of God is his cover story.

In Lenny's terms, Isaac is probably the first and worst of the snotty kids. None of this is in Genesis, but, thanks to Lenny, you're reading beyond the lines. Isaac refuses to do his chores. Makes up excuses. Won't milk the goats, says they butt him. Won't feed the chickens, doesn't like the smell. Mocks Abraham. Calls him a stinky old rooster, hides his Viagra roots so that he and Mrs. Abraham won't ever have any more kids.

Abraham is serious about this, is actually going to do it, even gets to the point of pricking Isaac's throat, drawing a drop of blood. According to Genesis, that's about when the voice of God stops Abraham.

Here's where Genesis goes totally unrealistic. Actually what stops him is not the voice of God but the voice of Mrs. Abraham. If he goes home and tells her that God told him to kill Isaac, she'll have plenty to say. Throws dishes around. Will feed his dinner to the cows. He's learned the hard way that this lady is one scary shrew.

An intelligent cookie, Abraham decides to play it safe. "Do my ears deceive me?" he says to Isaac. "God is telling me to give you one more chance. You are so lucky, but don't kid yourself. You don't straighten up, next time he'll give me the go-ahead."

So he unties Isaac, who lights out as fast as he can. When Isaac's at a safe distance, he turns around and thumbs his nose at Abraham.

So, yeah, some of this is in Genesis. Most of it is not. As Lenny would put it in the modern vernacular, Abraham is pussy whipped, and you would be, too, if you were married to Mrs. Abraham.

OK, all that is a week ago, and here Bart has just this one little problem. He knows that Lenny's Estate will sue him for copyright violation. Under the circumstances, he needs to distract Mr. Worrywort Number One. Well, his greenish B&B in Evanston is not all that far from the Northwestern University campus. He puts on his shoes, smooths the bedspread and heads out. Maybe one of the coeds is a law student.

Exactly two days later he and Ursula are on a plane to Charles De Gaulle airport. She's the smart, buxom, blue-eyed, 100% pure Aryan who waits on him at the coffee shop on Chicago Avenue. She's speaks regular English with the tiniest accent, and she's getting a PhD. Just yesterday her committee thumbs ups her dissertation on the Romantic poets. She's paying her own air fare, having stashed away every single one of her tips at the coffee shop.

His plan is simple and admittedly on the romantic side. He's going to be a modern day expatriate writer. He'll rent a

room in a 4th or 5th floor walk-up on the Left Bank, within sight of Notre Dame and conveniently near the action in Montmartre. Since of course he'll be on a budget, he'll buy a croissant every morning, tuck his laptop under his arm and sit in cafes writing great literature. If all goes well, there will be occasional periods of starvation, and every day or so he'll stroll over to American Express to see if anybody has bought one of his stories.

Ursula is not all that supportive. She says, "Bart, I haven't read your stuff but you'll have to be a Hemingway or a Scott Fitzgerald to get away with this."

She has a plan, too, and it's quite different. She'll visit her folks in Austria and then come back to Paris. At this point she gets very specific. "Find yourself a cheap apartment, something you can afford. I'll stay with you, and it won't cost you anything. If you have only one bed, you can buy a cheap air mattress, and we can take turns."

Their actual living arrangements will be on the complex side, and there will be some major problems, at least one of them insurmountable. Ursula is a strict Catholic and will not do pre-marital sex.

In addition she's a world class champion tightwad. He should have realized it when she told him that, in Evanston, she had saved every single one of her coffee shop tips. "I'm not buying a laptop," she says, "until I land my teaching job at the

Sorbonne or University of Paris. Until then we'll take turns using yours."

This Ursula is beginning to remind him of Mrs. Abraham. Since she's writing a book comparing the German and English Romantics, certainly she'll be elbowing him out and hogging the laptop 99% of the time.

On the long flight over, she reveals something interesting. "I'm a Freudian," she says. "I can tell that something's bugging you. Tell me about it."

Phil says, "Do you know anything about copyright law? Can a dead man sue you for copyright violation?"